The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ROY O. CARLSON

Interviewed by: Michael Springmann

Initial interview date: January 14, 1993

Q: We are recording on Friday, January 14, 1993 with Roy Carlson, who is going to tell us a little bit about his assignments abroad. He is going to launch into how he got interested in foreign affairs.

CARLSON: I had an assignment, towards the end of my career, on the Board of Examiners giving examinations to a few hundred applicants. We used to give points to people for their interest in the Foreign Service...Did they study for it? Did they take the examination a number of times? Were they persistent about it? I used to joke with my colleagues that on that I would have scored zero because I had no interest in the Foreign Service at all before I was 30 years old.

At that time I was doing graduate work in political science at the University of Chicago and working part time for a market research firm downtown. One of the guys, who was also working there, was a psych major from one of the other schools. He was a nut about taking examinations of different kinds. He talked me into taking a couple of civil service exams with him. One day he was sitting at his desk and was looking at an envelope, opened it and tossed it over onto my desk and said, "Roy, why don't you take a look at this. This is more your field. This is an application for the Foreign Service entrance exam. I took the exam last year and didn't do well on it at all." So I took it, looked at it and filled it out and sent the thing in about ten days before the closing date the last year I was eligible by age. You had to be under 31 at that time to take the exam.

In the fall I took the exam and passed it but wasn't particularly interested. The Department kept asking me to come to Washington to take the oral exam. At that time you had to pay your own way. I still wasn't too interested, but finally after a year, I came to Washington, took the exam, and passed it. This was in October, 1952. They told me that I would hear from them. They would probably bring me in in December. There was a presidential election, so December became January, January became March, and finally I was called into the Foreign Service in mid-March.

To sum it up, I guess I had no interest in the Foreign Service, whatsoever, before I entered.

Q: But you stayed in from 1952 all the way to 1976.

CARLSON: Yes that's about right. I stayed to 1978. I spent 25 years there. Often I was tempted to leave. But I guess inertia and some interesting assignments kept me in.

Q: You were in India, Scandinavia, Germany and the Department.

CARLSON: Yes. Pakistan rather than India. It was East Pakistan at the time and is now Bangladesh. I had a number of assignments in the Department or elsewhere in Washington. Being an economist, I was in the State Department's Office of International Commodities working on cotton policy and textile agreements. Then I took an assignment to the Department of Agriculture, as part of an exchange program between the two Departments. I spent a couple of years working on the PL 480 program, mainly the sales and donations of agricultural products to the less developed countries, particularly dealing with the World Food Program.

Then I took another assignment to the new Department of Transportation. Remember, late in the Johnson administration the Bureau of Public Roads, the FAA, the Coast Guard, and a few other small entities, were gathered together into a new Department of Transportation. Like all the Departments in Washington they thought they had to have an Assistant Secretary for Foreign Affairs. So several of us went over from State to help them organize it. Our office was mainly concerned...it was called the Office of International Cooperation...with transportation aid to less developed countries. That is, the Bureau of Public Roads, the FAA, and also the Coast Guard, provided manpower to AID under what we called PASAS...Participating Agency Support Arrangements and our little office backstopped all this and budgeted it.

From there I went back to the State Department, but into an office called the Inspector General of Foreign Assistance, which had been set up during the Kennedy administration to provide the Secretary of State with knowledge of what was happening to our foreign military, economic, and food assistance. The function no longer exists, having died in the Carter administration. But for some three years I traveled extensively in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and also some places in the United States where there were AID-sponsored research programs. I was basically looking at projects and programs and how they worked. What was the particular project supposed to do? Was it fulfilling its objective?

After that I went to Stuttgart as Deputy Principal Officer and Chief of the Economic Section. Then I came back to Washington for a final stint on the Board of Examiners.

Q: In these other agency assignments, did you see them as an advantage or disadvantage to your career? How were you received in the Departments of Transportation and Agriculture? Were you sort of the great white god beyond the seas, or did people wonder why you were there? How did you work within the Departments and did your experience as a diplomat help you to move through the different organizational cultures?

CARLSON: If you want me to be frank I will have to say that I probably was accepted more readily in Agriculture and also the assignment in the Inspector General's Office, because my colleagues didn't perceive me as a typical Foreign Service Officer. At least that is my judgment, based on what some of them told me. That doesn't speak so much for me as for what I think was a misperception that a lot of the other agencies had about Foreign Service Officers.

Q: That they are arrogant and somehow it is a priesthood anointed to do certain things?

CARLSON: I think something along that line. Perhaps an elitist attitude. Not so much that the officers themselves had it, but that the perception was out there from way back that this is how they were. It goes back to the old, Ivy League, well-to-do, different-from-us perception

Q: How did you help in the organization of the Department of Transportation or was it pretty fairly fleshed out when you arrived? Did you actually contribute to its creation and organization?

CARLSON: Our little office pulled together the three or four different functions that were being performed individually by the Bureau of Public Roads, FAA and the Coast Guard for AID, and coordinated them to the point where we could make multimodal transportation surveys for AID. For example, we went into Southeast Asia with a team of FAA and Coast Guard people and did a number of feasibility studies on things like search and rescue facilities, aids to navigation, airport controls, and other kinds of transportation problems in the area.

Q: When you were on the Board of Examiners in your final assignment, what kind of criteria did you use and how do you perceive the crop of applicants? Were they as good as they had been when you first joined the Service or were they better or perhaps worse or about the same?

CARLSON: That is a difficult judgment. We did have the feeling that as a broad group the applicants, perhaps, were deeper in their academic preparations for the Foreign Service, but not as broad, not as well-informed culturally. But this is a subjective judgment. You know, out of the applicants that we got, I think the final percentage was that only one percent of the people who took the Foreign Service written examination got in. That is, about 25 percent passed the written exam, and of those about 25 percent passed the oral exam. Some dropped out after that either for personal reasons or because they failed other parts of the examination...the background examination. Then they were put on the rosters and only the top qualifiers were eventually chosen, so a very small percentage made it. In fact, one of the things I did in counseling people who had passed the oral examination was to warn them that even though they were not likely to be on the roster, the chances of being chosen were not very good, so they should not drop what they were doing and should actively pursue other careers. Then, if they really wanted the Foreign Service, they should be prepared to drop those careers in order to come in.

Q: What were you looking for? I've had an impression as have other people that the real exam is the oral exam. The written test is to simply get the candidates down to a manageable number.

CARLSON: I should say that different examiners would be looking for different things. I had some colleagues who looked at every applicant as prospective ambassador and only wanted to choose a candidate whom he or she thought would have the potential for becoming an ambassador. I had the opposite point of view, perhaps because I am an economist and believe in specialization. My feeling was that we should pick somebody who could go out there and do a good job as a consular officer, or an economic/commercial officer, or admin officer, or as an Eastern European political officer, and then let the cream float to the top. That was my perspective of it, but not all my colleagues agreed. The result was that the selections were undoubtedly uneven and you could see this in the case, if you looked back in the file, of some of the candidates who took the oral examination several times and failed it one time, passed it the next, and failed it the next, passed the next, etc. You know that an applicant can take the exam over and over again to have a new place on the roster.

Q: You were in Dacca right after partition and within five or six years of partition.

CARLSON: Yes. We got there about five years after partition. We had only a small consulate, basically the consul, vice consul, (I was the vice consul) and a clerk-steno; plus a small USIS group with a library; plus the beginnings of an aid program which was then called the Foreign Operations Administration. As vice consul I was also admin officer. As a result I spent most of my time, (because the other agencies, USIS and FOA were growing so rapidly) I spent most of my time as a real estate agent and purchaser of furniture and expediter of shipping things in, not shipping things out because nobody had been there long enough to be shipped out.

It was a fascinating time politically because the Bengalis were trying to sort things out after partition.

Q: What is mine is mine, and what is India's is India's and it is in the middle that we had a foot in both worlds?

CARLSON: Bengal had a particular problem because when you see Yugoslavia you think of this right away...the Hindus and the Muslims were interspersed. They didn't live in separate areas. So when Mountbatten drew his line partitioning Bengal into two halves, this entity that was East Pakistan was about sixty percent Muslim and 40 percent Hindu. After the riots and migrations connected with partition were over, it ended up being about 80 percent Muslim and 20 percent Hindu. They accommodated that by having...even though people lived together, politics were separate. Certain seats in the parliament were allocated to Hindus and the rest to the Muslim parties of which there were several. There was even a small set-aside for Christians and Buddhists, maybe 1 percent.

The parliament was the remnants of the old parliament of the undivided Bengal. While we were there they had their first real election. There was a lot of speculation about how this would work out because the illiteracy rate was so high. But they conducted what seemed to us to be a fair election. It was so fair that the Muslim League, which was in power at the time, was voted out by 20 to 1. That is, out of 200 seats, they were left with only ten. In many of the districts the proportion literally was 20 to 1 against them. So they had a new government made up of diverse elements opposed to the Muslim League. Now some of these were very old politicians like Suhrawardy, Bashani, and Fazlul Hug, big names in prepartition Bengal. After about three months in office there were bad riots. Jute mill riots. Riots in the Chittagong hills. The central government imposed governor's rule and sent over General Mirza to rule the country.

Q: What sort of riots? Basically dissatisfaction with the economic situation?

CARLSON: No, I was at the Adamjee Jute Mill outside of Narayangang about three days before the riot. There was a lot of commotion going on. I had a very smart Calcutta man, Hamid, who was my driver and he said to me while we were touring the plant, "Boss, let's get out of here. I don't like what I am hearing." And three days later they killed about 500 of each other. It was rioting between the local people and outsiders that they called Biharis. The "Biharis" weren't from Bihar at all, they were simply other people from elsewhere in Bengal who had come to the mills to work. But it was me against you. They were all Muslim. While I was there, there was no overt Muslim/Hindu problem; that only came during the revolution in 1971.

Q: You did reporting on this I imagine. Did Washington accept what you were telling them or was there this clientism...we don't like what you are telling us; we don't want the unvarnished truth; we want what sounds good and makes the Pakistanis look good?

CARLSON: There was a special problem, I think, in that the Embassy was located in Karachi and the attitude of the officers at the Embassy tended to reflect the attitude of the West Pakistanis, not the Bengalis. I thought this was unfortunate. In fact I once recommended that it might be a good idea for anybody who was going to be assigned to Karachi to perhaps spend a year in Bengal in order to get the other perspective. It was never done. I suppose the administrative costs and problems are too great, but I think it would have stood the Department in very good stead when the revolution came in 1971.

As far as what happened back in Washington, I can't tell you. I spent my first 12 years in the field. My only impression when I came back from my time in Dacca was that the people in the medical division were especially interested to meet me because I had sent reports in on the incidence of cholera in Bengal.

In the last half year I was in Pakistan, I was kicked upstairs into a new job as political/economic officer. That was when the post was expanding and became a Consulate General. I can't tell you what the Department thought of my work. I do know that certain reports which I later sent in from Stockholm and Copenhagen were appreciated: I heard people say that, people in INR and on the desk. On the other hand, once dropping into the country desk, I was sort of surprised to see, for example, the way the weekly economic review was handled. It seemed to me that nobody really read it. A secretary just took it, clipped out the items and pasted them on a piece of paper and filed them. Again, I am at a disadvantage in answering your question because I never worked on a country desk.

Q: Would you comment on the effectiveness of the staff? Americans and locals at your various posts. Were they working all towards the same goal, or was it, "I want to be a super star and won't cooperate with you, but will do what I want to do?"

CARLSON: A very difficult question to answer as in different posts you get different people with different objectives. It was quite clear that in one of my posts the principal officer was looking out for himself. He was looking out for his own advancement, which he never got, and his own advantage. Luckily, he was replaced with a prince of a fellow who was really looking out for the welfare of the post and the people working there.

Q: I was once talking to the political counselor in Delhi. He had said something that I found rather interesting and I sort of try to apply it wherever I might be. He said that each post takes on about 60 percent of the characteristics of the host country.

CARLSON: Now there is a point to that. As always there is this problem of whether our people in a country are going to be advocates for that country or against that country. My guess is that as a general rule, political officers tend, by the nature of their function, to become advocates of the country that they are serving in, to present the views of that country. Economic officers perhaps less so because they generally have to vent particular grievances at the Foreign Ministry and elsewhere. Perhaps because of these different functions the attitudes are different. Does that make sense?

Q: Yes, it does. When you served in various countries were there any particular issues that the US had with Pakistan, Germany, and the Scandinavian posts?

CARLSON: Well, my knowledge would be mostly limited to the Scandinavian countries because in Germany and Pakistan I was in the consulates. But in the Scandinavian countries I was involved in all the economic issues, and most of our problems with the Scandinavian countries were economic. We were involved in the "sandwich war." The "sandwich war" came in 1960 when the airlines introduced the 707. In order to fill the 707 flights they started tourist class and they agreed that they would only serve sandwiches in tourist class. Well, sandwiches to an American airline meant slapping a piece of cheese or ham between two slices of bread. But to SAS it meant those elaborate Danish open-faced sandwiches. Immediately the American airlines charged SAS with unfair practices because they were serving these wonderful sandwiches in tourist class. That sort of thing.

But to more serious things. We always had shipping problems with the Scandinavians. They, themselves, have some of the same problems now, but then because of a history basically of union practices over here we had reached the point where most American ships were not flying American flags. They were flying flags of convenience, thereby paying lower wages. Whereas the Scandinavians were still flying their own flags and paying their own crews higher wages. This was a bone of contention.

Also at that time we had lots and lots of aid shipments going abroad. For the most part they were supposed to go on American bottoms and the Scandinavians wanted part of the action.

Q: In your various posts you went from the early '50s when State was pretty much the only foreign affairs agency represented abroad, and at the end there was USIS, Army Intelligence, CIA, Commerce, etc. How effective did you think this expansion of the foreign affairs community was? Was it easier to get things done when State alone was running the show?

CARLSON: This development had already begun when I came in in 1953. So when I was out in Dacca, for example, our biggest agencies were USIS and FOA. They already dwarfed the consulate, itself, at that time. CIA was out there too. In fact I had a hard time explaining to my wife why another "vice-consul" seemed to live so much better than we did.

Q: Did these agencies bring anything to the new order or were they kind of bureaucratic agencies fighting for their own turf only cooperating when it was in their own interests?

CARLSON: When I went out to Dacca we had joint administrative services, so as administrative officer I was doing as much for USIS and FOA as I was the consulate, if not more, due to their larger contingents who also traveled a lot more. I think I may have learned as much about the country in Bengal from my colleagues in USIS and particularly in FOA than I learned at first hand, because by the nature of their work they got all over the province all of the time, whereas, given the amount of the money we had for the consulate, I seldom could get out. Of course the USIS people had all of their usual university, academic community contacts.

Q: How extensive was the CIA presence? Up until I went to Jeddah, as visa officer, I was under the impression that the CIA was represented abroad, but that there were a few people at the embassy and a couple in the consulate. In Jeddah, two-thirds of the people who claimed to work for the Department of State didn't. It was an intelligence community post and not a Foreign Service post. I was just thunderstruck and still can't grasp it. Has CIA gradually expanded its presence, or was there one period when they grew like Topsy?

CARLSON: I don't think we had anything like that degree of CIA presence in Bengal or in Stockholm and Copenhagen. Just a few people under cover of the consulate or embassy. Whatever they had beyond that I don't know. By the way, in all of the posts I worked rather closely with a number of the CIA people and very amicably, particularly on economic matters.

Q: What do you think your greatest accomplishment or accomplishments have been during your time overseas?

CARLSON: Oh, I don't know. After the Cuban missile crisis, the Congress in its wisdom attached riders to a number of the foreign aid bills saying that aid would be suspended to any country dealing with Cuba...letting their ships go there, letting their aircraft fly there. A couple of times because of good personal contacts with the Danish government and timely awareness, I was able to head off what would have been embarrassing situations in which a Danish ship or aircraft might have gone to Cuba in violation of these rules.

Q: So they didn't say, "Oh, the Americans are trying to control our foreign policy?"

CARLSON: No, there was nothing in the press at all. It was done privately.

Q: The Danes were receptive to this?

CARLSON: Oh, yes. That is because we had worked well with somebody at the Foreign Ministry who had the confidence of the Foreign Minister. That was the kind of personal relationship that we worked on.

Now, to go back to Dacca. When we were in Dacca, Shaheed Suhrawardy, who had been one of the great political leaders of Bengal before partition...in fact if you look at films about Gandhi you will always see Gandhi meeting with Suhrawardy in Calcutta and trying to put down the riots. Suhrawardy was a politician out of power, but the Embassy wanted us to maintain good relations with him because he was still potentially powerful. We became very close friends. My wife still has old Christmas cards from him signed Shaheed. He liked pretty women, and after we left Dacca he did become prime minister of Pakistan. Working on the general social level we had ready access to him. In fact we were with him on the evening when important elections returns were coming in.

Q: What was your general impression of him? How effective was he and what kind of power base did he have?

CARLSON: Well, Pakistan was a strange country at that time. You know India. India is really a continent. It is more diverse than Europe. Here were these Bengalis, Sundis, Punjabis, all thrown together, separated by 1500 miles, speaking different languages. Joined together only because they tended to be Muslims under the old British India. Suhrawardy was a political power in Bengal, among several other political powers. A clever man. As all good politicians his scruples were not always of the highest. But he was able to become Prime Minister of Pakistan even if only for a couple of years, and for a Bengali that took remarkable political skills.

Pakistan basically broke down in 1971 when Bhutto in the West and Mujib in the East couldn't solve their political differences. It was a tragedy. But it was due to politicians who were not good politicians in the sense of being able to come to some accommodation. The result was that you had the revolution, the civil war, with all of the attendant hardships. So I would say from that point of view Suhrawardy was a "good" politician. He was able to effect coalition government.

Q: How close were you to other people of noted prominence during the rest of your career?

CARLSON: I once bought Adlai Stevenson an ice cream cone in Tivoli Gardens. I once sent the wrong brand of Scotch whiskey up to Lyndon Johnson's hotel room. That is about the size of it.

But there were men at lower but crucial levels. I was a pretty good friend of Eric Hoffmeyer, who was a professor of economics at Copenhagen, and then became head of the Danish National Bank. Because I had gone to Chicago and studied under Stigler and Friedman, he was interested in my economic views.

Some of the industrialists in Germany and in Scandinavia got to be pretty good friends. It is hard to pick apart and say because you were friendly, it had a particular effect.

Q: What was your greatest frustration in your career?

CARLSON: You know, I wasn't a very ambitious guy. I had limited goals. I don't think I began to get frustrated until almost the end of my career. And maybe it was being on the Board of Examiners and being so close to personnel that I found myself getting annoyed with the way things were being run. I found myself thinking it ought to be done this way or that way. But that may have been an end of the line syndrome, or it may have been that these problems had never come to my attention before.

Now if you want to know about specific instances where I was annoyed for a moment or for a short time...you know, "Why did they send this dumb guy out to a post like this?" or "How can it be that these two guys are being so stupid about a third guy?"...that happens all of the time. That is part of life, not specifically part of the Foreign Service.

Q: How would you see the Foreign Service as a career today? I talk to a lot of people casually and they say that they wouldn't recommend to their son or anyone to go into the Foreign Service because it has changed. It isn't the career that it used to be.

CARLSON: I was never very enthusiastic about it, as I told you in the beginning. Certainly after my first and probably after my second post, I was considering dropping it and doing something else. After the third, I was getting too close to retirement.

By the way, a lot of it depends on family and I have to say my wife was much more enthusiastic about the Foreign Service than I ever was, and she still is. But she has a different personality and also she grew up in it so she has a different outlook. But I have seen cases where it was impossible for someone to carry on in his family situation.

Also my children were born rather late and very conveniently. One in Stockholm and one in Copenhagen, then we had eight years here in Washington and then only three years in Germany. They didn't have the kind of bumpy road that a lot of Foreign Service children experience.

As far as the personal satisfaction out of the career, I think it sort of fitted me. I rather liked the idea of having a particular career broken up into a lot of segments and dealing with many subjects.

Q: With different things in different places. New challenges rather than the same old challenges.

CARLSON: Yes, that's right. I performed just about all the functions in the Foreign Service...admin, consular, economic and political, and assignments to other agencies. By the way, before I was in the Foreign Service I was with the Civil Service Commission and I had been in advertising and market research in Chicago. So it was a pretty wide spectrum.

I enjoy looking back on it and saying to you that it was fun.

Q: You served in embassies and consulates. Did you ever perceive a difference working for either one or felt as a consular employee you were somehow seated below the salt in dealing with the embassy staff?

CARLSON: I guess I didn't feel that way. I appreciated being away from the seat of power. In the embassies I would rather be down in the economic section than sitting next to the big boss at the top. I liked the independence that it allowed.

Q: Did the embassy ever try to exert control over the reporting from the consulates? I know when I was in Saudi Arabia, nothing was reported of substance to Washington from Jeddah without going through the embassy first.

CARLSON: There was only one inkling of this when I was in Stuttgart. My first consul general was sort of an activist, he liked to get things done. So he encouraged me to write an economic report on economic conditions in Baden-Wurttemberg. This was the time of the recession brought on by the OPEC oil embargo in connection with the October war between Egypt and Israel. I did write it and I understand it caused a great stir in Bonn because, the way I read it, the Ambassador must have seen it and said, "Well, if this guy could do it in Stuttgart, why can't you do it here?" The guys in the economic section were upset about it. I had to apologize to them and tell them that I was forced to do the report. So it was sort of reverse control.

Q: Given the changes in Germany that I saw between when I was there in the late '70s and the time I was back in the late '80s I am interested in your impressions of Germany today or at the time you were there.

CARLSON: I will have to give you a little background. My wife's father was a German diplomat here during the war. She was about 16 when she had to go back to Germany where she stayed from 1942-47. Then she went to the American consulate and got her passport and came back here as she was an American citizen by birth. She had been born here in Washington. So I met her in Chicago. In the meantime her parents lived in Germany in a small spa called Bad Pyrmont, a little south of Hannover. I have been going to Germany since 1953 when I first visited there and most recently I was there a year ago. Maybe I have been there 20 times in addition to my time at Stuttgart. Much of my impression is of this small town which may not be typical.

I think that the older generation still has a great appreciation for America's attitude towards Germany after World War II, the reconstruction, reaching out to bring them into the community of nations. I don't know about the younger people, but I didn't think that attitude has changed very much even among most of them. You may get some fringe groups...my God, we had the Bader Meinhof gang in Stuttgart when I was there...who don't exactly love us.

I am reminded of when I was in Stuttgart in 1973 and there was a recession caused by the oil embargo. I was talking to one of the industrialists and said, "I guess with this recession you will have to send some of your guest workers back to Croatia, Italy, Spain, etc." And he said, "Yes, I am afraid so, but I am reluctant to let them go. They are the only ones who work anymore." You can imagine what this statement did to my presumption of the German work ethic. I assume that this trend has continued and they are still the ones who work hardest.

Q: That is what they are saying whenever they get going on the foreign problem in Germany...yeah, but they are the only people who still work here. I know for a fact that it used to be difficult getting a hold of anybody to get something done on Friday afternoon, now you can't do anything at all on Friday or Thursday afternoon.

CARLSON: The Germans got used to the good life. But then we have too, although perhaps not to the same degree.

I hear a great deal of complaints about the medical system over there. But that criticism may be skewed. They all certainly take advantage of their Kur. My mother-in-law lives in a spa and as you know one of the oldest rackets in Germany has been the Kur paid for by the insurance company.

Q: Is there anything you would like to expand on that I haven't covered?

CARLSON: I don't think so. I always had the feeling every time we went through one of those reorganizations at State...maybe because I am an old conservative...that we should let things lie there, let them work themselves out. I came in at the time when we went through the big RIF in 1953 and right after that came the Wriston program. That was the lead for one reform after another. It seemed to me that we should stick with a system for a long enough period to see how it would really run. But that is my conservative nature.

Q: Okay. I have covered most of the main points that I wanted to do. So unless you have something else you would like to say, let's stop here.

CARLSON: Okay.

End of interview